

SUMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO FUTURE WATER SUPPLIES FOR AUSTRALIA'S RURAL INDUSTRIES AND COMMUNITIES

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This inquiry provides a very important step to sustainable water use in rural Australia. This initiative has largely come from industry who are now well placed to understand both the business opportunities for resource use and the processes of sustainable development.

The key resource issue for Australia is that water policy and water management have been narrowly focussed on environmental components and controlled by public sector interests. The command and control processes of governments are not providing new opportunities for either water savings or new water uses to support rural industry development or export growth.

It is refreshing that the Pratt Water initiative has developed ideas for water saving and rural development that would not have otherwise surfaced through the processes and considerations of public bureaucrats and scientists. It is hoped that this Inquiry can give rural industry investors a new role in regional development and the encouragement to pursue sustainable development initiatives in partnership with scientists from private industry.

As an environmental scientist and Managing Director of Environmental Research and Information Consortium (ERIC) Pty Ltd for a period of 10 years I have come to appreciate the resource development constraints imposed on rural communities by government agencies, without due need or proper scientific base. There is currently a very poor level of resource data, information and knowledge within the public domain for investors or developers to utilise for resource risk assessment or to seek new enterprise site selection assessments, or manage resources. Research conducted by ERIC had clearly demonstrated by 1996 that the currently promoted salinity model (rising groundwater and salt) developed by public scientists was flawed and based on very poor scientific procedure. Rural communities are now suffering from many areas of poor resource information and doomsday science about impending environmental collapses.

Other research undertaken by ERIC using climate and soil data identified areas within rural Australia that were highly capable and suitable for many high value and export crops, eg. wine grapes, cherries, plums, neem, sandalwood and mahogany, however the opportunity to develop these areas was limited by water availability.

Australia has managed to drought proof our cities, major irrigation areas and other strategic resource users. However, it can be expected that the Wentworth Group of public scientists will develop doomsday scenarios for water crises in Australia, to attract AHT and NAP monies to their water projects that interest them.

Very little effort and resources have been applied by the commonwealth and state governments into strategic enterprise site selection in rural Australia, and the means and economics of water delivery to these areas to promote regional development. The Pratt Water project has done this work for the MIA and demonstrated that significant water savings can be achieved through private industry innovation. Much of these savings can be used to place perhaps 50% of current irrigation back into the river systems and 50% of the savings to new rural enterprises. These concepts and initiatives in water management are unlikely to arise through current policy

development and innovation process that are commanded and controlled by commonwealth and state public servants.

There is a need for national water policy to facilitate the ideas and needs of industry and local governments, whom are denied access to commonwealth and state funding sources for policy development, water management R&D, water resource risk assessment and new innovations in water management. Monies for these purposes are largely channelled through commonwealth and state agencies and during the past 40 years they have achieved very little for better management of Australia's surface waters. Also, our public scientists have dismissed the potential value of our massive groundwater resource and the value of selecting strategic aquifers for sustaining high value rural enterprises. They have similarly dismissed new innovations in industry for water assessment and water management.

I urge the committee members on this Inquiry to examine the current process by which water policy is developed and propagated into the community. There is clearly a need for a new process to progress water policy development, water management R&D, water resource risk assessment and new innovations in water management (eg. soil salinity mapping and water conditioning to reduce salinity impacts). This process must actively engage with industry investors, developers, innovators, service providers and local government whom at the end of the day carry the major risk in sustainable development and also deliver services and business growth opportunities to rural communities.

Australia can better use its water resources and develop high value enterprises in rural Australia in a sustainable manner, without threatening ecological or environmental values. Industry needs the opportunity to demonstrate that it is well equipped for this role and can make a valuable contribution to the water management process. However, industry needs public investment support for infrastructure; including the public investment into the collection of public good resource data (eg. climate, soils, vegetation, hydrology, etc.).

